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Paolo Casalis and Tiziano Gaia (directors) The Barolo Boys: The Story of a Revolution

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The Barolo boys: The Story of a Revolution, documentary, Paolo Casalis and Tiziano Gaia (Directors), Stuffilm Creativeeye, Italy, 2014, 64 minutes

Once upon a time there was an Italian King of wines, known also as the Wine of Italian Kings. It was called Barolo, and it survived in the same form for a century or more. Then, only 3 decades ago, there was a revolution. Unlike other revolutions, the intent was not to dethrone the king. Instead, the revolutionaries wanted to promote the king, but put him in modern dress.

The Barolo Boys tells the story of this group of wine revolutionaries. In the 1980's, a group of young winegrowers and winemakers started to introduce new techniques to the Barolo region, techniques drawn mainly from France. The story begins with a young winemaker, Elio Altare, who visited Burgundy and found himself comparing the financial wealth of French *vignerons* to the misery of the Barolo producers. He concluded the reason for the misery was that Barolo wines did not satisfy modern palates and were poorly promoted. As a result, a small group of young winemakers started to experiment. They aged their wines in *barriques* instead of the traditional old casks, and they changed their vineyard practices to emphasize ripe fruit.

The new wines were a huge success among critics and consumers, and they were promoted widely. But these new Barolos also raised a passionate controversy, and a "Barolo war" was started. The "traditionalists" defended the old ways of making wine and stressed the typicality of Barolo, refusing to make a wine in the new "international" style. The "innovators" claimed that they had amended the flaws of the old way of making wine and that the new wines better matched modern consumers' tastes.

The controversy was also a generational conflict. In one dramatic episode of the story Elio Altare used a chainsaw to destroy the big old casks in his family's cellar, which resulted in his father disinheriting him, convinced that the young Elio had lost his sanity. Also linked to the generational divide was the collaborative spirit of the group of "revolutionaries," who collectively shared the results of their experiments in the cellar and vineyard. This collaboration accelerated the progress for the revolutionaries, but it was something simply inconceivable among the old wine-makers, who remained jealous of their techniques and suspicious of their competitors.

The film focusses on the human side of the revolution, and on its economic and social consequences. The interviews with the protagonists (Elio Altare, Chiara Boschis, Marco de Grazia, Giorgio Rivetti, Roberto Voerzio) and Carlo Petrini, founder and president of the Slow Food movement, are punctuated by old super 8 clips and by scenes of a local brass band marching and playing in the lovely vineyard landscapes of Langhe. Though leaning on the side of the innovators, the film also presents the arguments of the traditionalists. The film does a good job of capturing the protagonists in revealing moments. And you meet some fascinating

characters, like an unforgettable old worker – a perfect example of the old mentality-- grumbling because he is ordered to prune imperfect bunches, which he clearly considers an inexcusable waste of grapes. The film provides a vivid picture of the rise of the movement, of the controversy, and of the passion of the protagonists. But it also becomes apparent that the cohesion of the group today is not what it once was, and that there is some nostalgia among the “revolutionaries” as they recall their “heroic times,” as in the film “The Big Chill”.

If you appreciate human interest stories, you will enjoy this film, as did I. And if you do not know anything about the story, you will find it a good starting point. If, instead, you are looking for more technical information, this film may leave you unsatisfied. One unanswered question is, of what did the “revolution” actually consist? Though the use of *barriques* was at the core of the controversy, the “revolution” consisted of many other technical changes that are not discussed in the film. These changes in the vineyard and in the winemaking technology included everything from thinning the grape clusters to reducing the time of fermentation. The innovators were looking for wines that required a shorter aging period (which provided an obvious economic advantage), had more color, and had a taste more in line with the international standards promoted by Robert Parker. Some innovations, like dropping grape clusters, were also widely adopted by traditionalists and, in general, the movement led to a greater focus on technical progress and on quality throughout the Barolo region. In the end, the traditionalists settled into a sort of peaceful coexistence with the revolutionaries, and both benefitted from the increased media attention and tourism. Though there are some hints about these issues in the film, they are not fully developed.

From an economist’s perspective this film raises some interesting questions. One is, why did only some of the wine-makers follow the new movement? Negro, et al. (2007) have documented how the shift to modernism paid off both in terms of ratings from the critics and in wine prices. The second and related question is, why was there such a passionate fight among traditionalists and modernists? After all, they could each make and sell their wines the way they liked, and still find consumers accordingly. I have two hypotheses to offer. One is that each party felt the existence of the other producers acted as a negative externality, threatening the reputation of their businesses. This was probably truer for the traditionalists, who considered the typicality and the link to traditions and to the *terroir* as important assets. A second explanation concerns the non-pecuniary benefits from wine production. It is evident from the film that wine-makers (from both groups) were interested in more than just the income from their activity. Much more was at stake: prestige, acceptance, and recognition, all of which had a social dimension. Non-pecuniary issues are often disregarded in economic analyses and, I suspect, they are particularly relevant for the wine industry, and especially for the highest quality segment where creativity is crucial. Perhaps these are the considerations that lead wine-makers to disregard the motto of modern management schools, “be market oriented, not product-oriented.”

Finally, as a personal note, I was delighted by a tale told by Elio Altare at a presentation of the film I attended. Altare related that the much admired Bartolo Mascarello¹, who was a leader of the traditionalists, had told him: “Look, you use *barriques* and you must go on doing so. You know that I’ll never use *barriques*. But eventually, the result will be that those who buy six bottles from you will also buy six bottles from me, and vice versa”. What a fine statement of the rationality of exploiting the segmentation of consumers’ tastes and their search for variety!

References

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¹ Mascarello passed away about ten years ago. He was a famed anti-Nazi partisan during WWII, a friend of philosophers and writers, a leader of the traditionalists, and a great personality. He drew his own labels, two of which exclaimed “Barricades, not *barriques*” and “No *barriques*, no Berlusconi”).